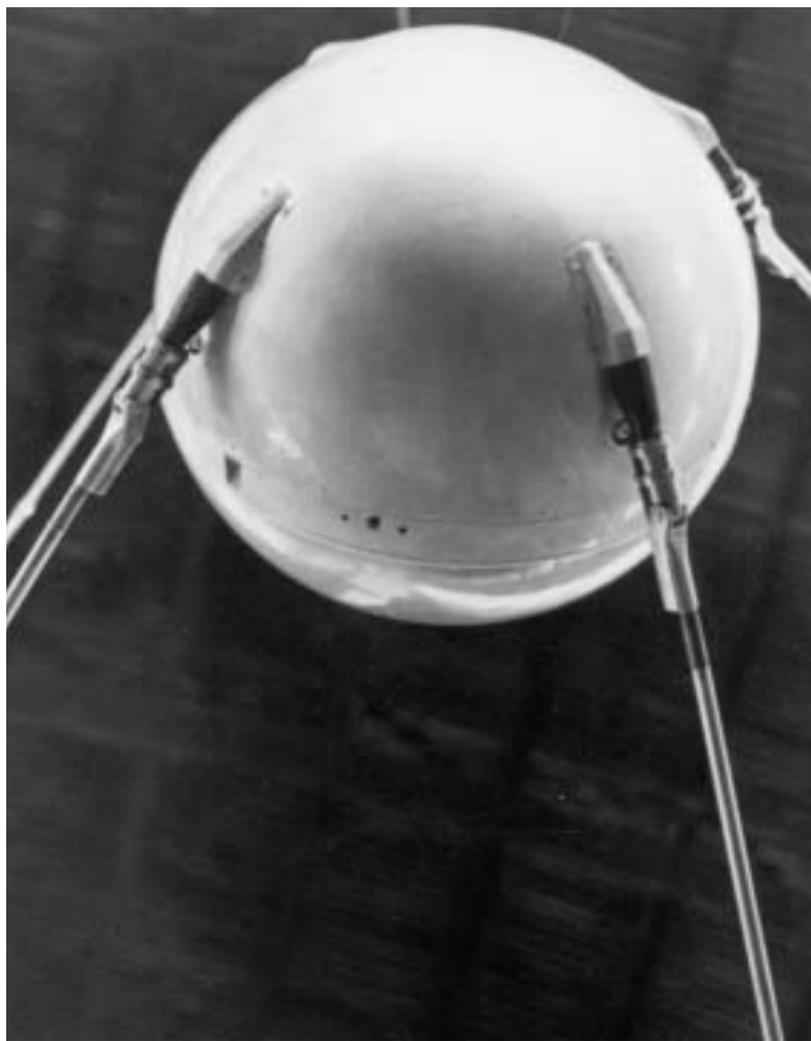

*Mutual Influences: U.S.S.R.-U.S. Interactions
During the Space Race—Asif Siddiqi*



Sputnik 1.

I would like to take a broader historical view of the space race and look at the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States in the early years of the space race. Then I would like to add some thoughts on the writing of history and how we understand it.

In the past ten years, our view of the space race has changed dramatically. Much of this has had to do with the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent availability of an unprecedented amount of information that has allowed us to rewrite that one side of the history of the space race. Previously, we only knew bits and pieces of what the Soviets did. Now we know not only what they did, but why they did certain things, which is an important aspect of writing history. Writing history is about making sense. It is about building patterns, about putting together pieces and making those pieces fit. It is not about chronologies. The writing of this new history indicates a fundamental maturity of our field and space history. We are now able to move from chronologies to making sense.

One of the things that I want to talk about today is how we have understood the space race. Traditionally, we have viewed it in terms of action and reaction. One side reacted to the other and did certain things, and then the other side reacted to that. So there was this chain reaction of events.

The new historical record suggests that's not so far from the truth, but perhaps we need a slightly more nuanced approach. I would like to touch on three very important milestones in the space race and reexamine those events in the light of new information—Sputnik, the flight of Yuri Gagarin in 1961, and the Moon race.

Sputnik has been considered the first big milestone in the space race. For over forty years now, we have considered Sputnik the first shot, the opening salvo. I would not disagree that Sputnik was the first physical manifestation of the space race, but I would argue that the space race actually began before Sputnik. As most of you know, Sputnik was launched during the International Geophysical Year, a period of intense scientific research organized by scientists all over the world. There were a number of key proposals from the American side to participate during the International Geophysical Year [IGY].

As most of you know, the Eisenhower Administration announced in July 1955 that the United States would launch a satellite during the IGY. The reasons behind that decision are fairly complex, and so I will not go into that.

But what's most interesting from the Soviet side is how they reacted to this announcement. This announcement by the Eisenhower Administration set up a series of deliberations on the Soviet side about how they should react. These deliberations culminated in a project to preempt the American side by launching a huge scientific observatory. So, for the Soviets, the race had already begun immediately after the Eisenhower Administration's announcement.

An interesting sidebar to this occurred in late 1956, when Wernher von Braun's team-tested a missile. The Soviets mistakenly believed that this missile was actually trying to launch a satellite, which shook them. This misperception fueled a Soviet sense of urgency that "we have to do this before the Americans." Thus, they dropped their plans to launch this huge scientific observatory

and decided to launch a small metal ball, which they could quickly do. Of course, we know that small metal ball as Sputnik.

So this new information asks us to reconsider and reframe certain events that we know as the “Holy Grail” of history. In one sense, the space race might not have begun on 4 October 1957, but rather it perhaps began two years earlier. That’s an important distinction that may lead us to think about these events in a sharply different way.

The second issue is Yuri Gagarin’s flight in 1961. Certainly apart from Sputnik, no other event has been more important for both sides in the early years of the space age. For the Soviets, this was their high point, their peak. For the Americans, Gagarin’s flight was important because it set off deliberations that led to the decision to go to the Moon. Again, this demonstrates an action-reaction dynamic.

The new information also suggests that the Soviets really were reacting to the Americans, or at least what they thought the Americans were doing. Gagarin’s flight was planned almost as a reaction to Mercury, and the timing of his flight was, in many ways, a reaction to what von Braun and others were thinking in terms of when NASA would launch the first American in space.

A lot of it had to do with timing, but a lot of it was pure luck. It could have easily been Alan Shepard who was the first human in space. It turned out to be Yuri Gagarin. But there definitely was an action-reaction dynamic, and it’s important to take that into account in looking at other events in the space race too.

Finally, I would like to go to the third issue, which is the Moon race. We know that the Soviets were in a race to the Moon with the United States, and they tried hard. Kennedy committed

NASA to a Moon landing in 1961. It was a national goal. But the Soviets hardly took notice. In 1961, they had just launched Yuri Gagarin and had no reason to feel threatened. It was only in 1964 that they really began to think seriously about a Moon landing. It was a national priority only in 1967, which was too little, too late.

The action-reaction dynamic also plays into the Moon race. One of the interesting things that I have discovered in my research is how American information seeped over to the other side and how the Soviets dealt with it. Apollo is an interesting case because repeatedly throughout the 1960s, the Soviets simply did not believe that the Americans would make it to the Moon by 1969. They really had this feeling, and you would see this in documents. “Well, yes, they’ve got this equipment ready and that equipment ready, but it would just be impossible for them to make the 1969 deadline.” What really shook them up was the Apollo 8 mission in December 1968, because this impressed upon the Soviets the imminent reality of a human Moon landing. But again, by then, it was too little, too late.

I think what all of this indicates is that, in some sense, the seeds of the Soviet failure were actually laid much earlier in the sense of complacency that emerged after Gagarin’s flight. In some ways, the Soviets believed that “we’re the best already,” and it was too late before they realized that the U.S. was committed to Apollo and, thus, was a real threat.

Another interesting point concerns the post-Apollo period. The Soviets handled their failure in an unsurprising way, given that they had hidden their effort in the first place. They responded

to Apollo by saying, “Well, we weren’t in the race at all,” and for many years, this denial was accepted lore for most Western observers. Because of this Western notion that “Well, we were just racing ourselves,” many critiques of Apollo emerged. Whether or not one thought Apollo was a good or a bad thing for the ultimate future of the American space program, the value of it as an international competition and a demonstration of supreme rivalry was called into question for many years. During the 1970s and 1980s, many critics were frustrated and disappointed that “we’ve spent so much money and effort to get to the Moon first, and yet, there was no race after all.”

Of course, in the past ten years, we have understood more clearly that there was indeed a space race. We know it was hard-fought, and we know the Americans won. I think this is one example of how history itself is dynamic and changing, pointing out that nothing is fixed. I expect that how we remember the Moon race forty years from now will be quite different from how we remember it today.

We should not compartmentalize history into saying that it is restricted by artificial boundaries and we can only understand history by looking through these blinders. We need to broaden our perspective by looking at the other side and trying to understand the action-reaction interrelationship that was going on in the 1960s and 1970s.

I would like to end with some final thoughts on how we evaluate history. Professional and academic historians often want to write about events and people from some measure of dispassionate distance. We tend to evaluate space history

through contexts such as geopolitics, the Cold War, the missile gap, and presidential administrations. But there is also something to be said about imbuing history with the essence of what makes people want to do certain extraordinary things. If we look at the flight of Yuri Gagarin or the flight of Alan Shepard, it is almost impossible to see these as events outside of the Cold War.

But I think it is also important to recognize how important the flight of Yuri Gagarin, for example, was simply in the course of human history. It was the first time that a human being had left the planet Earth. I think that historians should not be afraid of appealing to that sense of the human imagination—to step back from geopolitics and the Cold War to see an event from a much broader perspective. I hope historians can take up that challenge in the future.